

**Unveiling the Interplay Between Perceived Social Support and Imposter Phenomenon:
Role of Self-Awareness as Mediator**

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Abstract

In recent times the buzz about imposter phenomenon is very much in academic literature. It is a psychological phenomenon that affects any individual and makes him/her feel pressured to excel in areas such as academics, workplace, or personal relationships. The prevalence of this phenomenon has increased to a larger fold due to the emergence of social media usage during the COVID-19 pandemic. The current study tries to explore the role of Perceived Social-Support and Self-awareness in determining this phenomenon among the adolescent and adult population of Kerala. The data for the current work was analyzed using SPSS and Jamovi. The results of the study revealed that self-awareness and perceived social support are the significant predictors of imposter. The findings of the study along with the limitations and implications are also discussed.

Keywords: Imposter phenomenon, social support, self-awareness, COVID-19

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In recent times, the condition called imposter syndrome (sometimes called “imposter phenomenon”) have gained a lot of lime light in academic literature. It refers to a pattern of thinking which involves self-doubts regarding one’s personal accomplishments and a persistent, internalized fear of getting exposed as a fraud in any social context. Despite evidence of their competence, those experiencing impostor syndrome tend to attribute their achievements as a mere luck or the result of any external factors rather than their own abilities and consider themselves as unworthy of the praise or value they receive from others (Parkman, 2016; Feenstra et al., 2020). They even consider that their achievements and accolades are fraudulent and fear that it will be uncovered as fraud by others. Over recent years, the imposter phenomena have been depicted as a “syndrome”, leading to an impression that it is a pathological condition experienced by “patients” (Bravata et al., 2020). However, till date the condition is not been conceptualized as a mental disorder either in DSM or ICD. Therefore, the current study is an attempt to understand the factors responsible for the development of imposter feelings among people.

Empirical research done on imposter phenomenon primarily operationalized this condition as a personality trait developed with in an individual experiencing imposter feeling (Bravata et al., 2020). Contrary to this notion, study done by Feenstra et al. (2020), state that these negative perception about self are developed because of the interaction between the personality characteristics and environmental conditions. According to Clance (1985), the personality dimension of imposter phenomenon is finely described by six significant characteristics that provide very valuable insights into the cognitive and emotional patterns among individuals experiencing imposter syndrome. However, it is important to note that impostor syndrome can manifest differently in each person, and individuals may exhibit some or all of these characteristics to varying degrees (Sakulku, 2011; Addae-Konadu et al., 2021). These characteristic patterns include: impostor cycle (despite of hardwork, the success is

attributed to the external causes), need to be the best (constant need to be the best in every aspect of life), characteristics of superman/superwoman (must work harder than others to get succeed), fear of failure (minor setback is the proof of their incompetence), denial of competence and discounting success (Despite of their hard work and competence, success is often attributed to the external factors), feeling like an impostor when success is achieved (They feel that they don't deserve the success when it is achieved).

Similarly, according to Clance et al. (1985), imposter condition is largely influenced by the social and interpersonal factors. Feenstra et al. (2020), in their studies on imposter phenomena have also supported this notion that both social as well as the contextual factors are fundamental in shaping the imposter feelings among individuals. However, most of the early researches on imposter phenomenon have focused on the personal characteristics of individual and less attention was paid to the role of social or interpersonal factors. Therefore, the current research work tries to understand the role of perceived social support in determining people experiencing imposter phenomenon.

Perceived Social Support and Imposter Phenomena

Perceived social support as a socio-interpersonal factor can serve as a coping strategy to mitigate the effects of the imposter phenomenon (Snipes, 2023). It can be considered as one's feeling of being cared, loved and supported by the other members of the group (Cobb, 1976). Studies suggest that perceived sense of social support from significant others in the group can work as a psychological buffer at stressful situations (Bhagat et al., 2012; Sia et al, 2013), and keep their psychological functioning appropriate by maintaining a positive mental health (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Sia & Bhardwaj, 2008). However, it can also contribute as maladaptive coping when not fostered and used appropriately (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, Sreelekha & Sia, 2022). Study done by Hutchins et al. (2019), suggests that social and

emotional support from friends and important others play a very instrumental role in regulating emotions and cognitions related to imposter thoughts and experiences. Clance (1995) in his theory on imposter phenomenon has talked about the role of early parenting and its influence on the development of the imposter feelings. He emphasised that the imposter feelings in a child will develop when there is a discrepancy between family-derived feedback about abilities and success and actual performance and skills. Similarly, Clance and Imes (1978) have also identified that the imposter feelings among people develops as a result of their early family relations and worsens in later stages of life if associated to a poor coping strategy (Bussotti, 1991; Caselman, 2000; Want & Kleitman, 2006). Although, there are a lot of evidence suggesting the causal link between parental support in early stage of life and the development of imposter phenomenon, limited studies have found to document its impact among children or adolescents. Therefore, the current study tries to identify the role of social support in early stages of life and its influence in determining imposter feelings. Also, the current study tries to differentiate imposter feelings among adolescents and the adults and identify which age group is more vulnerable of the condition.

H1: Perceived social support is negatively correlated with imposter phenomenon.

Self-Awareness and Imposter Phenomena

It is noteworthy that imposter phenomenon is a sense of flawed self-assessed competence, suggesting that persons who have it overestimates their skill level compared to how well they perform. However, these false impressions may keep high performers from realizing their full potential or relishing their achievements (LaPalme et al., 2022). Thus, it exacerbates fraudulence through inadequate beliefs related to one's skill and abilities, thereby indicating issues in introspection, suggesting self-reflection and insight as essential variables to be assessed as an important factor in this phenomenon. These constructs can be assumed as

the self-awareness of an individual. It refers to one's awareness about his emotions, cognitions and behaviour (Goleman, 1996). The term self-awareness and self-consciousness are used interchangeably though they differ. Earlier researchers referred to situational variations as self-awareness and dispositional variation as self-consciousness (Fenigstein et al., 1975; Silvia, 2021).

Self-consciousness has two dimensions, private and public, distinguished based on one's self-focused attention, i.e., either internal (the innermost feelings as well as beliefs one has towards oneself) or external (the beliefs one holds about what other people might think about them) (DaSilveria et al., 2015). Private self-consciousness is characterized by personal, covert and unshared aspects often not observed by others (Carver & Scheier, 1981). In contrast, public self-consciousness is the tendency to be aware of others' view of oneself. Self-awareness and its aspects have been studied relatively less regarding the Imposter phenomenon. A study conducted by Jannetti (1997) among non-clinic Bulimic men found the link between social self and variables such as fraudulence, social anxiety and public self-consciousness. This study further revealed that self-consciousness is integrally linked to body dissatisfaction and an eating disorder. The study further talked about the influence of self-consciousness on the imposter feelings among bulimic men and states that higher levels of self-consciousness lead to lower levels of body esteem and higher levels of eating-disorder behaviour.

Much of the recent studies done to understand the impact of self-awareness and imposter phenomenon have basically focused in studying the emotional aspect. Study done by Haddadi et al. (2010) have found that there exists a very strong relation between the construct of emotional intelligence and imposter phenomena. The study further states that there is a strong link between emotional intelligence and self-awareness on imposter phenomena. In the present study most of the focus is given to an individual's private self-

consciousness as a mediating variable on the relation between social support and imposter phenomena among adolescent and adult population.

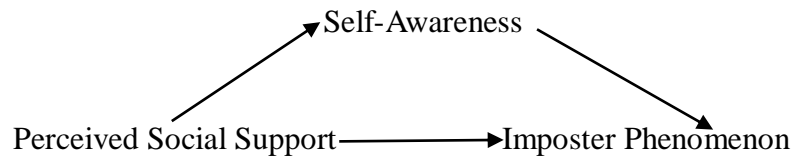
H2: Perceived Self-awareness is negatively correlated with imposter phenomenon.

H3: Self-Awareness mediates the relationship between perceived social support and imposter phenomena.

Imposter syndrome is more ubiquitous recently, with individuals experiencing feelings of fraudulence in various aspects of their lives and a constant fear of being unmasked as intellectual imposters. Despite increased awareness of this syndrome, it has well-established consequence detrimental to an individual's well-being. Those experiencing imposter syndrome struggle with internalizing their success, even if they're actually successful or competent enough, which can lead to a link between self-awareness and imposter syndrome. Those suffering from the imposter phenomenon tend to be harshly critical and judgemental, often occupying themselves with thoughts of being different from others, wanting to be unique, and making mistakes as signs of being unsuccessful. These negative thought patterns and behaviour indicate a lack of self-awareness among people experiencing imposter feelings. Hence, self-awareness seems to be a promising resilience factor for recognizing and overcoming imposter syndrome. However, the construct of self-awareness and imposter phenomenon are yet to be linked in research. Therefore, the current study will be a stepping stone in identifying this causal relationship.

Figure 1

Proposed Model to Demonstrate the Mediation of Self-Awareness on the Relation Between the Constructs of Perceived Social Support and the Imposter Phenomenon.

**Method****Research Design**

The study is designed as a cross-sectional research design which is descriptive in nature. Purposive sampling method was used to select the sample in this study. Among the quantitative research methods, the survey method was used in this study to collect and investigate the data.

Participants

The study included 259 individuals from the state of Kerala with two sub-samples; adults (ages 18-50) and adolescent (ages 13-17). Participants from other states and who did not fit the age criteria were excluded from the study.

Procedure

The data for both adults and adolescents were collected differently, google forms (online method) were used for the adult participants while for the adolescent participants, printed forms (offline method) were given. Before collecting the data, the details and information related to the study were described to the participants and their consent were

taken. For adolescent participants, consent was taken from them and their parents/guardians. Whereas, for participants above the age of 18, the consent was taken from the participants themselves.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS statistics 25 version and Jamovi. The main statistical techniques used for the study are Karl Pearson's product moment correlation, independent sample t-test, Mediation Analysis and Descriptive statistics.

Ethical Considerations. The investigation prioritized the dignity of each participant and obtained their consent prior to the study. The purpose of the research and the potential benefits of the study were informed. No incentives were given to the participants.

Participation was completely voluntary and the participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants data were anonymized and no identifying information was asked during data collection. The confidentiality of the data was ensured. Proper instructions were provided and all the doubts were clarified.

Measures

The constructs used in the study were adopted from previously published literature. Clance's (1995) version of the scale was used to measure imposter phenomenon among the participants. It is a 20 items self-report scale measured on a five-point Likert scale. It included items like "I avoid evaluations if possible and have a dread of others evaluating me".

To measure the construct of perceived social support, the multidimensional scale of perceived support developed by Zimet et al. (1988) was used. It is a 12 items scale with 3 dimensions (family, friends and significant others) measured on a seven-point Likert scale

ranges from 1-Strongly Disagree to 7-Strongly Agree. One sample item is “There is a special person who is around when I am in need”.

Self-Reflection And Insight Scale (SRIS) developed by Silvia (2021) was made use to measure the construct of self-awareness among the participants. It is a 12 items short version scale of the previously validated scale consisting of 20 items developed by Grant et al., (2002). The short version measure self-reflection and insight. It’s a self-report measure, measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranges from 1-Strongly Disagree to 7-Strongly Agree. One sample statement include: “I frequently examine my feelings”.

Results

Table 1

Respondent Profile Based On Demographics

Socio-Demographic Variables	Groups	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	89	34.3%
	Female	168	64.8%
	Prefer not to say	2	0.9%
Age	13-17	107	41.3%
	18-30	102	39.3%
	31-50	50	19.4%
Educational Status	Below 10 th	48	18.5%
	10 th	24	9.2%
	12 th	60	23.1%
	UG	59	22.7%
	PG	67	25.8%
	PhD	1	0.7%

A total of 259 respondents completed the survey, out of which 89 were males (34.3%) and 168 were female (64.8%) and 2 respondents (0.9%) were not comfortable in disclosing their gender. Most of the participants were between the age group of 13-17 (41.3%). The data

also shows that most of the participants involved in the study were PG graduates (25.8), followed by 12th Pass (23.1%) and UG graduates (22.7%).

Table 2

Mean, Standard Deviation and Correlations of Imposter Phenomenon (IP), Private Self-Consciousness and Perceived Social Support.

Variable	M	SD	IP	PSS	SA
Imposter Phenomenon	61.92	13.309	-		
Perceived Social Support	58.70	11.08	-.014	-	
Self-Awareness	52.64	8.874	-.13	.21	-

N=259

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

As shown in Table 2, the mean of the Imposter phenomenon (IP) was 61.94(SD =13.309), the mean of perceived social support (PSS) was 58.702 (SD =11.089) and the mean of private self-consciousness (SA) was 52.64 (SD = 8.874). As observed from the table, a significant negative correlation exists between IP and SA ($r = -.131$, $p < 0.01$). Perceived social support (PSS) is positively correlated with SA ($r = .21$, $p < 0.01$). No significant correlation exists between IP and PSS but was a negative.

Table 3

T-Test Comparisons of IP, PSS And SA by age.

Variables	Age	N	M	SD	t-value	sig.
IP	Adolescent	107	63.73	11.707	1.831	.068
	Adult	152	60.67	14.232	1.893	
PSS	Adolescent	107	59.28	8.35	.703	.483
	Adult	152	58.29	12.67	.753	
SA	Adolescent	107	49.73	7.05	-4.584	.000
	Adult	152	54.68	9.45	-4.818	

* $p < 0.05$

As observed from the results of the independent sample t-test (Table.3), the results indicate that there was no significant difference between the IP of adolescents ($M=63.73$, $SD=11.70$) and adults ($M=60.67$, $SD=14.23$), $t(257) = 1.831$, $p=.068$. Similarly, there was no significant difference between the PSS of adolescent ($M=59.28$, $SD= 8.35$) and adults ($M=58.29$, $SD=12.67$), $t(257) = .753$, $p=.483$. The results also showed that there was a significant difference between SA of both adolescents and adults and indicated that SA was greater in adults ($M=49.73$, $SD=7.05$) than in adolescents ($M=54.68$, $SD=9.45$), $t(257) = -4.58$, $p=.000$.

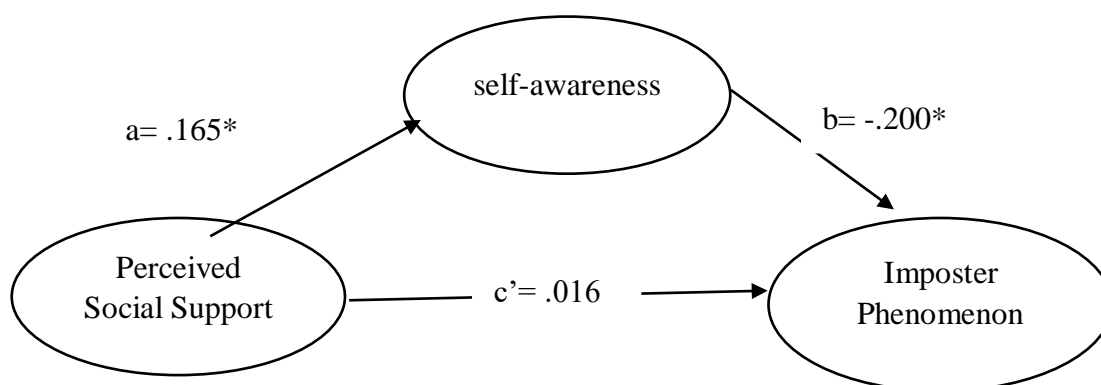
Table 4*Results of Mediation Analysis*

Effect	Relationship	β	SE	95% Confidence Interval		t	p
				Lower	Upper		
Indirect	PSS \rightarrow SA \rightarrow IP	-0.33	0.020	-0.079	-0.001	-	<.05*
Direct	PSS \rightarrow IP	0.016	0.076	-0.133	0.165	0.21	.83
Total	-	0.016	0.074	-0.164	0.130	-0.22	.82

The study assessed the mediating role of self-awareness on the relationship between perceived social support and the imposter phenomenon. The results revealed a significant indirect effect ($\beta = -.33$, $p<.05$). Hence, it is evident that self-awareness construct fully mediates the relationship between perceived social support and imposter phenomenon, supporting the hypothesis H3. The mediation analysis summary is presented in Table 4. Further, the direct effect of perceived social support on imposter phenomenon is measured. The results revealed an insignificant direct relationship ($\beta = .016$, $p=.83$) between Perceived social support (PSS) and Imposter phenomenon (IP) in the presence of the mediator Self-awareness (SA).

Figure 2

Model Showing the Mediating Role of Self-Awareness Between Perceived Social Support and Imposter Phenomenon.

**Discussion**

The main objective of the study was to explore the extent self-awareness/private self-consciousness and perceived social support as the protective factors have role in imposter feelings among adolescents and teenagers. The results of the study shows that there is significant negative correlation between the imposter phenomenon (IP) and private self-consciousness (SA). This explains the fact that individuals with less self-aware about themselves and who infrequently engage in self-reflection and insight experience more imposter feelings. This finding is in support with a study conducted among employees in multinational companies. It found that rumination and imposter feeling are positively correlated and also predicted the same (Jain, 2022). Further, this finding suggests that individuals with imposter feelings ruminate about their past to hide their insecurities leading to high anxiety, dysphoric mood and emotional instability. Similar results were also demonstrated which indicated that people with higher levels of imposter feelings indulge more in ruminative thinking (Whitman & Shanine, 2012). These findings reveal that individuals with imposter feelings are less likely to focus on inner experiences values and emotions, indulging in intellectual self-doubt and self-deception. These behaviours lead them

to have lower self-esteem and a lower sense of personal identity, affecting their professional and inter-personal lives.

Further, the study found that perceived social support feelings are positively correlated to self-awareness. This finding is in line with the self-consciousness theory (Buss, 1980). The theory suggests that perceiving more social support may enhance a higher sense of self-awareness and vice versa. The perception of social support may provide a secure base for individual to reflect on their thoughts and emotions, thereby providing a validation for themselves and gaining a confidence on their self-concept. According to Wilson and colleagues (2020), perceived social support has positive relationship with mindfulness, self-compassion, savouring and positive psychological well-being among people. This shows that the perception of social support not only elevates self-awareness among people, but it does elevate self-esteem, self-worth and promote a positive self-image among them (Behnke et al., 2011; McMohan et al., 2011; Reinherz et al., 2003).

While there was no significant relation between the imposter feelings and perceived social support, a weak negative correlation was found. This was substantiated by a previous study done by Pervez et al. (2021). It suggests that there is no significant relationship between social support and the feelings of imposters among doctoral students. On contrary, other studies have found a significant negative correlation between organizational support and imposter phenomenon (McDowell et al., 2015). This shows that there is a significant inconsistency in our findings which can be attributed to the involvement of other confounding factors or the mediating variables involved in the study. Furthermore, these inconsistencies can be handled by future researchers by focusing on identifying the relationship between perception of social support and imposter phenomenon.

Similarly, on the other hand, the results of the independent-sample 't' test found that self-awareness was found to be higher among adults than adolescent participants. One might think self-awareness as the ability to self-reflect upon a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. This might be the highest during the adolescent period as passing through a developmental stage requires a high introspection as a part of forming one's identity and establishing a true self. Studies indicate that intellectual development and cognitive processes progress through one's lifespan stipulating that those processes stabilize during early adulthood (Demetriou & Bakracevic, 2009).

Although, no difference was established between imposter phenomenon among adolescents and adults in our study, no prior research work has detected the same. Other studies have demonstrated that IP decreases with age, as individual gain more expertise and motivation, and experience fewer episodes of doubt and fear of failure (McLean & Avella, 2016). Similarly, no difference was found in perceived social support between adolescent and adults. This accounts that individuals perceive social support despite of their age differences. This can be supported in terms of the collectivistic culture followed by the Indian society. People willingly seek social support from others when problems are encountered (Lobburi, 2011).

The study found a complete mediation of self-awareness on the relationship between perceived social support and imposter phenomenon. This reveals that perceiving high levels of social support along with high self-awareness helps in reducing the imposter feelings among people. It further states that having greater social support directly does not decrease Imposter feelings as the individual might be not aware of the skills and abilities which may lead to social isolation.

Limitations & Implications

As every research work have some limitations, this work does have certain limitations. Most of the data collected in this study was made use of social network platforms. Limited interaction was happened between the researcher and the participants. The data were collected using self-report measures of the participants which may be prone to social desirability and conformity bias. The questionnaire was only available in English language, therefore, all the participants comfortable in English language were included in the study. Therefore, the sample included in the study might not completely show the accurate representation of the population. Although the present study focuses on the overall perceived social support received among the participants, it does not talk about the nature and origin of it. Also, the study only focused on the role of self-awareness and perceived social support variables in determining the Imposter phenomenon. Variables like Self-esteem and other related variables can also be included by the future researchers.

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